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TEACHING AS AN "ASSISTANT" IN FRANCE.

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PRACTICAL INFORMATION ON THE LIFE ON AN "ASSISTANT DE LANGUE ANGLAISE" AND COMMENTS ON THE FRENCH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM ARE GIVEN. THESE INCLUDE SUCH AREAS AS TEACHING HOURS AND SCHOOL SCHEDULES, SCHOOL AND CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE, TOPICS FOR CONVERSATION CLASSES, RELATIONSHIPS WITH PUPILS AND OTHER TEACHERS, QUALIFICATIONS, SALARY, SOCIAL SECURITY, TRAVEL OPPORTUNITIES, STATUS, AND SPECIALIZATION. MERITS OF THE SYSTEM FOR THE AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER ARE CONSIDERED. THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "BABEL," VOLUME 3, NUMBER 3, OCTOBER 1967, PAGES 13-16. (AF)

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TEACHING AS AN "ASSISTANT" IN FRANCE

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WHAT exactly is an *assistant de langue anglaise?* What are his functions? Has he any status in the *lycée?* What qualifications are required? What are the conditions and hours of work? How much does one earn? Is it worthwhile for an Australian teacher of French or German to go to Europe to work in this capacity? These are some of the questions which I asked before leaving Melbourne, without receiving a satisfactory answer, and I presume that such questions are still asked. In this short article I should like to provide some practical information on the life of an *assistant* as well as a few comments on the French educational system which might be of interest to Australian French teachers.

The official instructions state that one is required to give conversation classes to small groups of 10 to 12 pupils, usually senior pupils from Form IV to Matriculation. The maximum obligation is 12 hours a week, but the actual number of hours taught usually depends on the needs of each school. Classes are carried out on a friendly basis, and one discusses topics of everyday interest such as hobbies, leisure activities, holidays, life in Australia or England, differences between conditions in Anglo-Saxon and French schools, sports and so on. Obviously, the level of discussion depends on the standard of the pupils' conversational English, but French pupils of Leaving or Matriculation standard are usually quite capable of taking part in a fluent discussion on a wide variety of topics. In my senior classes I have been able to arrange short debates on such subjects as co-educational education (which fascinates French pupils, since co-educational schools are still rather uncommon in France), the role of the press and advertising, and the advantages and disadvantages of television. Because of his age and because he is not considered a full *professeur,* the *assistant* is more often than not treated as an ally by his pupils, especially in the *baccalauréat* classes, where they are usually 18 to 20 years of age. In general, no specific university qualifications are required, although in practice only graduates or undergraduates are appointed. Most *assistants* come from the U.K., where students reading French are required to spend a year in France before graduation. This very fact probably accounts for some of the problems of the position.

The basic aim of the scheme is to provide French students studying English with an opportunity of listening and talking to a native speaker of English. This is an excellent idea, and the French educational authorities deserve full credit for having shown such imagination and for providing the necessary financial support. Nearly all English secondary schools also have a French *assistant,* although conditions there are not as liberal as in France. Australian teachers and pupils suffer considerably from the absence of such a scheme. In France it is intended that these teachers should be able to profit fully from their stay in the country by pursuing their studies of French literature and culture, and this is one reason why they are required to teach only 12 hours a week. This arrangement allows the teacher to earn enough to live on while at the same time leaving him enough time to continue his studies. In view of this double aim, the headmaster usually tries to arrange a convenient timetable which leaves the *assistant* two or three days free rather than having his 12 hours scattered all over the week. This, however, depends entirely on the co-operation of each school administration, and some *assistants* complain about their inconvenient timetable. It must be remembered also that French schools work different hours from those in Australia. In France, the school day is from 8 a.m. - 12 with a two-hour break for lunch and from 2-6 p.m. six days a week, with perhaps Thursday afternoon free. Teachers and pupils attend school only when they have classes, and it is in the interests of the *assistant,* particularly if he is doing research work, to have his hours grouped as much as possible. My own experience over the past two years has shown that the school authorities make every effort

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to help in this way, within the limits of the school's needs and the overall timetable.

The salary is quite reasonable in view of the duties involved. One receives about 800F (approx. $A160) a month, including a small area allowance, for ten months a year, from October to July. This amount is adequate to live on in the provinces, but it is not quite enough if one lives in Paris, where the cost of living is considerably higher. For English undergraduates the ten-month arrangement is satisfactory, as they can return to England without much difficulty. In the case of an Australian who wishes to stay in France for a two-year period or more, the unpaid summer months provide special problems.

Unfortunately, there is no provision for special allowances for qualifications or teaching experience. The *assistant* has the same social security rights as a French teacher and he is obliged to contribute about $12 a month to the excellent national health scheme. This covers all medical and dental care, and 80% of all fees are reimbursed. Some *lycées* provide free board, but this depends on whether a boarding school is attached. Meals may be provided at the school for a small fee, and if one is enrolled at a university one may eat at the *restaurant universitaire* for the derisory price of about 45 cents a meal. School holidays are long enough to allow plenty of opportunities to travel in Europe, and school administrations are usually very understanding in arranging for extra leave of absence if one wishes to extend one's holidays for a specific reason or if one has to travel for the purposes of research work.

What is the status of the *assistant?* This question would probably be of particular interest to a fully-qualified Australian teacher of French. Firstly, one should remember that it is most unusual for the *assistant* to be a graduate and even rarer for him to have had teaching experience. Because of the system whereby hundreds of young English undergraduates work in this category, the status of the position, in the eyes of both the school authorities and the pupils, has suffered considerably. Too many undergraduates go to France quite immature, bereft of a real sense of responsibility, lacking experience in dealing with the ferociously independent French student and basically incapable of holding and interesting a group of teenagers for an hour at a time. As a result, it is not unusual for headmasters to complain about their inefficiency, pupils may have a negative attitude and these teachers may feel neglected and unwanted in the school. This vicious circle, a product of both the personalities and the system, can mean that the *assistant* is considered a sort of overgrown pupil by the school authorities and an undergrown teacher by his pupils. Many complain bitterly about this, and it is not entirely their fault.

Because teachers in French schools come and go at odd hours of the day, there is often little guidance available for the young undergraduate. Sometimes the English teachers befriend the *assistant,* but all too often he is left to his own devices. Indeed, it is quite possible for him to spend a whole academic year without getting to know his English colleagues, except for the initial introduction in the headmaster's office. Of course, this will depend on individual personalities, and I have found it extremely valuable and most instructive to make contact and discuss various problems with my colleagues. But because French teachers are very busy and because of the inherent difficulties in making real contact with French people at any level, communication often depends on the willingness of the *assistant* to make the first move and to show that he is genuinely interested in his work.

This all-important communication with one's colleagues, if one is to enjoy the experience of teaching in a French school, is made even more difficult by the peculiarly French attitude to school of both teachers and pupils. The feeling of *esprit de corps* which so often characterises Anglo-Saxon schools is rarely present in a French school. The French *lycée* is not the *alma mater* of the pupils. Little provision is made for group activities such as sports, meetings and hobbies, the house system as we know it does not exist, the form teacher concept is not at all developed, the prefect system does not exist, and there is little provision for staff cohesiveness. Schools are usually large (I am teaching at a *lycée* with over 100 teachers and more than 2,500 pupils) and teachers are present only when they are actually teaching. Several of my more cynical pupils have often pointed out that school is simply a place where teachers and pupils have agreed to meet for the purpose of imparting and receiving information, and that as far as they are concerned the local supermarket or church hall would do just as well! While we may deplore this situation, it should be pointed out that most teachers and pupils value the per-

sonal freedom and liberty which it implies. The Frenchman prefers to belong to his family or to a club of his own choice rather than being obliged to belong to a school, which for the teacher represents a job like any other, and for the pupil an obligation laid down by law. In my discussion with colleagues I was interested to learn that they consider our system of being at school from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. both inconvenient and a restriction of their basic freedom. "Comment! Il faut être à l'école toute la journée . . . Je ne serais plus libre . . . " is a typical comment. If there are obvious personal advantages for teachers in the French system, particularly for those writing doctoral theses, the psychological disadvantages for the pupils seem to be no less great. The French system would not work in an Anglo-Saxon environment and there is no doubt that our system would be highly unpopular in France. *Vive la différence!*

Is it worthwhile for young Australian teachers of French to spend a year or so as *assistants* in France? There is no doubt in my mind that the answer is a categorical yes. Quite apart from the all-too-rare opportunity of living in a French atmosphere for a lengthy period and the invaluable experience of observing a different educational system from the inside, it is of cardinal importance for the foreign language teacher (or for any teacher for that matter) to be able to widen his horizons, to try to break through the isolationism that living and teaching in Australia imposes, to improve his knowledge of the language and to develop a sympathetic understanding of a nation with totally different attitudes, habits and living conditions.

The Australian teacher will be somewhat surprised at the relative uninvolvement of teachers with their pupils, and he will probably be amazed at the profoundly intellectual approach to school work. Rightly or wrongly, and as the result of the traditional elitist aims of French education, the French high-school teacher is concerned less with his pupils than with his subject. Education in France is in general not child-centred, and despite the recent reforms of democratisation it will be a long time before this situation ceases to exist. The teacher is a specialist in his subject—French teachers teach only one subject—and as a rule he is not much concerned with his pupils' activities over the week-end, and even less concerned whether they have too much homework in their other eight or nine subjects. The well-known aim of French education as *culture générale* is no text-book myth; it is a reality, with the result that Leaving and Matriculation pupils study some eight or nine subjects, including at least one foreign language (more often than not two foreign languages), Latin or Greek, mathematics, science, physics, chemistry, history, geography and a rigorous course in French literature which makes our English Expression and Literature courses pale into insignificance, since all the major authors from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century have been studied by Matriculation year. This lack of specialisation has obvious advantages in providing pupils with a broad cultural background, although pupils usually complain, not without reason, about the volume of work and the encyclopaedic character of their education.

The great disadvantage of this approach is that it results in the neglect of other aspects of the pupils' personalities. It is true that about three hours a week are allotted to sport, although in fact most pupils are so obsessed with the need to pass their examinations that they do not take much interest in these activities. Private hobbies and leisure-time activities are reduced even more by the heavy load of homework every evening. If school holidays in France seem long by Australian standards, it must be emphasised that the French pupil works much harder than his Australian counterpart. My own view is however that the result of cramming in so much information is that the *lycéen* seems less able to think for himself than our students and is not significantly better prepared for university education. Furthermore, French pupils derive little enjoyment from their secondary school experience, except perhaps as intellectual achievement if they are successful. It is a task to be done, a hurdle to be overcome if they are to acquire the coveted *Bac*, the key to nearly every professional position in France.

I hope it is obvious from the above comments that the experience of working in this capacity in France can be fascinating and instructive. If Australian Education Departments are unable to arrange for French *assistants* to be on hand in our secondary schools, they should certainly try to devise a plan which would permit young teachers of foreign languages to undertake this work in Europe. The pedagogical advantages of such a scheme are obvious. To make it work would require imagination, foresight and generosity. The Nouméa *stage* is a step in the right direction,

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and it is to be hoped that some financial assistance on the same lines can be arranged to send foreign language teachers to Europe. Schemes similar to the French one exist in Germany, Austria, Italy and Switzerland. Our teachers are often discouraged by the considerable financial strain involved, and they have certainly not so far been given any tangible encouragement by the State Education authorities. But a foreign language teacher who has lived and taught for some time in the country whose language and literature he teaches will certainly be able to do a much better job than one who has never crossed his own State borders. It is rare to find an English teacher of French who has not been to France, and the same applies to French teachers of English.

It is all too easy to dismiss this idea on the grounds of distance. It is rather a matter of policy and organisation. Australian Education Departments could give teachers leave of absence to coincide with the European academic year and could contribute towards the high cost of fares. In this way the foreign language teacher would be far better equipped to teach his subject, particularly with regard to oral proficiency, at last being given its true importance in Australia with the advent of the audio-lingual methods. He would also be in a position to widen his pupils' horizons and increase their awareness of and sympathy towards different foreign cultures. Such a scheme would also help to overcome the complacent isolationism which still seems to exist in Australia. And why not a similar scheme for history and geography teachers? Altogether, the teacher exchange programme between Australia and other countries remains incredibly underdeveloped.

In spite of problems of organisation, the *assistant* scheme provides an opportunity which every young Australian foreign language teacher should grasp, even though it requires courage and some financial sacrifice. The alternative is to teach French or German from text books and hearsay and to wait for long-service leave, when it may be too late to profit fully from all that Europe has to offer.